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Exploring the Village Republic: Gandhi's Oceanic Circles as Decentralized Peace Systems

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Abstract: The concepts of "Village Republic" and "Oceanic Circles" are probably the less well known aspects of Gandhi's political thought, in spite of their cornerstone importance for the realization of nonviolent societies. Using the Peace Systems framework to provide actual examples of nonwarring arrangements between societies akin to Gandhi's "Oceanic Circles" and presenting a wide array of cases that support the possibilities of community self-government, decentralized peace systems are introduced as a combination of internal nonkilling/nonviolent organization and external peaceful coexistence with neighboring societies. This chapter explores the continuity of decentralized self-government from our common nomadic forager past to wider historical and current institutional frameworks such as the Icelandic Commonwealth, the Iroquois League, the Council of European Communes, the Zapatista Autonomous Rebel Municipalities or the Kurdistan Communities Confederation, that share the functional goal of securing peace and cooperation while preserving autonomy.

Keywords: Community self-government, Oceanic Circles, nonviolence, popular assembly, direct democracy, nomadic foragers, peace systems.

Introduction

In his efforts to translate the principles of *Ahimsa* (nonviolence) into the realm of politics, Gandhi developed the vision of *Swaraj*, understood as full community self-government. In many of his writings, the practical manifestation of *Swaraj* is presented as a "Village Republic" following the traditional Indian *panchayat* and *gram sabha* assembly government. While Gandhi formulated the specifics for such

"village republics" in some detail, the overall vision on how these self-governed units should relate to each other in a stateless context remained somewhat vague.

The Gandhian "Oceanic Circles" vision, a structure of innumerable villages with "ever-widening, never-ascending circles", not a "pyramid with the apex sustained by the bottom" but a "circle whose centre will be the individual"(1998 [1946]: 326) remains as one of the least explored aspects of Gandhi's political thought. Summy (2013: 55-56) interpreted Gandhi's vision of the most "outer oceanic circle" as a world federation of interdependent units based on the small self-sufficient village republics. Such a vision shares attributes with the concept of "peace systems", as defined by Fry (2012).

Fry's concept presents peace systems as "groups of neighboring societies that do not make war on each other", providing a variety of examples such as the Upper Xingu River basin tribes of Brazil, the Iroquois Confederacy of North America, and the European Union. This is a significant contribution as it establishes the possibility and some factual characteristics of nonwarring societies, i.e., societies that do not make war either in absolute terms or at least against other societies within the system itself.

Considered together, the notion of "peace systems" sheds light on historical and current examples of structures that approach the idea of "Oceanic Circles" through expanded social identities, interconnectedness, interdependence, peaceful values and symbolism, and superordinate conflict management institutions that prevent escalation of potentially lethal group conflict. Likewise, Gandhi's "Village *Swraj*" provides insights on how to move nonwarring societies beyond external peace to become internally nonviolent, or at least nonkilling, starting from the bottom—every single village—and moving up to a "Global Oceanic Circle". This synthesis of the ideas of Gandhi and Fry will be referred to as "decentralized peace systems", encompassing nonwarring external arrangements and nonkilling/nonviolent internal organization.

This chapter will look into our past as a species to try to understand the evolutionary relevance of such decentralized peace systems and to provide recent political experiences that reflect their present validity. The findings of this chapter offer an array of heuristic models for the development of nonkilling social and political forms of organization locally, regionally and globally.

The Political Prehistory of the Village Republic

Within Anthropology a general agreement exists that for over 95% of our existence as *Homo sapiens* (200,000 years of anatomically modern humans vs. a variable fraction of the last 10,000) we have lived and organized ourselves socially as small-band hunter-gatherers, also referred to as nomadic foragers (Bicchieri, 1972; Sponsel, 2010; Giorgi, 2010; Fry, 2013). Even though extrapolations always need to take into account the influence of surrounding state societies, contemporary small-band hunter-gatherers provide an extraordinary window to understand the species-typical social arrangements of humans during the Late Pleistocene (126,000 to 12,000 years ago). These societies have been characterized by an ethos of egalitarianism, cooperation, generalized reciprocity (“gift economy”) or simply sharing, extended alloparenting, nonviolence and embeddedness within nature. Economic self-sufficiency, small group size, and non-hierarchical and unsegmented social organization or lack of fraternal interest groups, all favoured cooperative and egalitarian practices intended to safeguard harmonious nonkilling social relations (Sponsel, 2010). In fact, Younger (2008) concluded on the basis of demographic and geographical analysis that small (under 1,000 individuals) egalitarian or unsegmented societies, characterized by the relevance of face-to-face contact and close ties, have more chances for survival if they actively prevent violence, thus providing evolutionary grounds for forms of social organization that represent the basis for decentralized peace systems as described in this chapter.

In evolutionary terms, the most recent 10,000 years of human existence have seen the emergence of species atypical behaviours, first in the Near East and then in other world regions, such as coordinated intergroup violence (i.e., warfare) and political structures that support and expand inequalities (i.e., the State). Structural violence is coincident with social stratification and socio-political organization at the state level (Sponsel, 2010: 21). The distribution of this anomaly in geographical and historical terms has been uneven, from the first known transitions into the Neolithic occurring roughly 13,500-10,000 BP years ago during the "pre-agricultural revolution" (Knauff, 1991) to the current existence of a small set of small-band hunter-gatherer societies, such as the Batek and Paliyan of Asia or the Mbuti and San of Africa, from which we derive much of our ethnographic knowledge of these forms of social organization. Taking these facts into account, some authors have argued that, from an evolutionary perspective, we are not well adapted, at least neurologically, to cope with our current existence in large, hierarchical, competitive and violent communities where “the vast majority of human beings have become unhappy, ill and with limited material resources” (Giorgi, 2009: 117; also see Narvaez, 2013).

In political terms, nomadic forager societies are characterized by egalitarianism, high levels of personal autonomy and absence of formal leaders (Fry, 2006: 181; Boehm, 1999: 67). No single person has political power over anyone else in the group, even if nominal headmen, respected elders of either sex, could exercise some degree of influence which was by no means binding, as coercion, violence and aggression are considered unacceptable (Endicott, 2013: 245-6; Woodburn, 1982; Leacock, 1978: 249). This usually happens informally in the day-to-day basis as part of constant social interaction (playing, singing, joking or sitting together). Otherwise, any incipient leadership is "very elaborately constrained to prevent them from exercising authority or using their influence to acquire wealth or prestige" (Woodburn, 1982: 444).

Examples can be drawn for dozens of societies (for a comprehensive survey, see Fry, 2006). One contemporary group is the South Indian Paliyan, a society that has endured—together with other groups—among the surrounding stratified Tamil society (Gardner, 2010; 2013). While the Paliyan and other South Indian foragers clearly practice individual autonomy and self-reliance in their decision-making (including self-restraint in the face of conflict), the coexistence of “assemblies of community members” (*kuttan*) among some groups shows a distinct form of collective deliberation “by which the principal parties can weigh public opinion and make personal decisions on whether or not to back down” (Gardner, 2013: 306). Though these kinds of band or camp meetings do not actually have the power or authority for binding decision-making, they seem to be a tool for responding to conflicts and fostering non-coercive collective deliberation while preserving each individual’s responsibility for forming their own options.

Whereas Gardner considers that the *kuttan* could be a new institution among the Paliyan, i.e. a recent egalitarian adaptation of the Indian *panchayat*, it could also be argued that the *panchayati raj*, a traditional system of self-government present throughout the Indian subcontinent, could be the continuation of pre-existing social arrangements such as these egalitarian assemblies with parallels in other nomadic hunter-gatherer social institutions such as the Australian Aboriginal “Big Meeting” (Tonkinson, 2013: 268). Recalling Lee (1992: 40), egalitarian societies "have social and political resources of their own and are not just sitting ducks waiting to adopt the first hierarchical model that comes along". In fact, the *panchayat*, based on an assembly (*ayat*) of five (*panch*) respected elders chosen by the community in a *gram sabha* general assembly, had conflict resolution at the core of its original orientation until it was forced to serve as part of the state's tax extracting apparatus. The early Rigvedic

(1700-1100 BCE) *vidatha* assemblies, in which women also participated on equal terms (Sharma, 1996: Ch. VII; Rohman, 2005: 23), suggest the distant and perhaps egalitarian origins of such institutions.

In both instances, community assemblies are probably more about “moralistic social control” (that can tackle antisocial deviance with gossip, mockery, ostracism or shaming) in the form common to nomadic foragers (Boehm, 2013: 318) than coercive authority to impose decisions. This is also the case for so called “good heads”, one to three people singled out in most Paliyan bands “who are able to step forward voluntarily to help when there is tension over social or ritual matters”, using “word play, clowning, or soothing speech to distract and calm their fellows” but lacking any formal authority (Gardner, 2010: 187). Clastres (1989: 30) argued that normal civil power in stateless societies is based on the *consensus omnium*, with the formal headman, council, or community gathering having the role of maintaining peace and harmony in the group with neither the authority nor the capacity to use coercive force. Such forms of non-coercive problem-solving and conflict resolution were probably the common setting during the vast majority of our specie's evolutionary past.

The slow decay of nomadic hunter-gatherer societies was ignited by the appearance of agriculture, which allowed for growing population densities, geographic concentration of resources, social and political hierarchies, monopolizable long-distance trade of valuable prestige goods, and food storage and management beyond the domestic units (Ferguson, 2013: 192). Such state agricultural societies also played (and continue to play) an important part in the quick and violent marginalization or annihilation of neighboring hunter-gatherers. All these are preconditions for the development of the first forms of states and, with them, organized interpersonal violence, but they are not determining factors. In fact, during the Neolithic and moving into the Bronze and Iron Ages, there seem to have been extended periods where the practice of agriculture did not necessarily translate into structural violence and widespread warfare, perhaps overcome by mutual interdependence and cooperative efforts, social ties among groups and peaceful attitudes and beliefs (Ferguson, 2013: 193), settlement size being a critical factor. Strictly egalitarian societies have also been identified in groups with delayed-return horticultural or agricultural economies (vs. the immediate-return characteristic of hunter-gatherer societies) such as the Majangir of Ethiopia and among nomadic sea-dwellers such as the Sama or Bajau Laut (Macdonald, 2011: 72). A good representation of the diversity of such manifestations can be found in *Anarchic Solidarity* (Gibson and Sillander, 2011).

Surprisingly, most of the attributes that characterize early agro-pastoral societies in the literature are quite the opposite of those present in some modern agricultural societies up to the early 20th century. An example from Western Europe such as Galiza's rural society is, in general terms, representative of highly dispersed populations with relatively low densities, social egalitarianism, self-reliant families and villages, consistent mutual aid, consensual group decision-making and problem-solving and extensive communal stewardship of the land and its resources (Rodrigo Mora, 2013; Dias, 1981, 1984; Peixoto, 1990 [1908]; Tenorio, 1982 [1914]; García Ramos, 1912). So-called “feudal” systems overlapped with the existence of such horticultural and agro-pastoral societies in parts of Europe and elsewhere for the last millennia, but actual control was extremely limited beyond the extraction of certain rents and taxes. This is not to say such forms of social organization can be likened to those of nomadic hunter-gatherers, but they illustrate the endurance of many key aspects of our ancestral ethos even within rural communities enclosed by contemporary industrial states.

Dentan (2010: 131) argues that small, local, egalitarian, mutual-aid groups “occur spontaneously at every level of human biological and social evolution”. These “primary groups” emerge even in the interstices of the state as temporal communities such as the “Rainbow Family” gatherings or disaster relief groups or as more stable endeavours. Prolonged interstices can appear in areas with weak state control due to lack of political and economic relevance, as it could be argued for rural areas such as Galiza throughout modern history, or where the state has actually lost control, such as the Zapatista Autonomous Municipalities, in the context of indigenous insurgency, or Kurdish Democratic Confederalism in Northern Syria. Contemporary intentional communities, in the form of ecovillages, communes, cooperatives or semi-permanent protest camps, replicate in many ways the basic characteristics of such “primary groups”. In the case of disasters, the unplanned appearance of such localized groups suggests that “just as many machines reset themselves after a power outage, so human beings reset themselves to something altruistic, communitarian, resourceful and imaginative after a disaster, that we revert to something we already know how to do” (Solnit, 2009: 18).

Anthropologist Marvin Harris (1990: 438) placed the emergence of what he described as “nonkilling religions”, namely Jainism, Buddhism, Hinduism and Christianity (at least with regard to fragments of the *New Testament*), in a common background of state failure to deliver “worldly benefits”, the confluence of brutal and costly wars, environmental depletion, population growth, the rise of cities, food shortages, widespread poverty, and rigidified social stratification. The ethics of *Ahimsa* (nonkilling/nonviolence), a

basic tenet of the first three spiritual traditions mentioned by Harris, continued to reappear around the world over the following millennia as an important component of many social, political, and spiritual movements through a diversity of deeply rooted forms.

Harris' explanation of the emergence of the first known conceptualizations of nonkilling/noviolenace can be related to Ferguson's archaeological account of how early episodes of intense warfare were followed by prolonged periods in which no material evidence of organized intergroup violence can be found. It could be hypothesized that relatively peaceful societies may have re-emerged around the egalitarian mutual-aid ethos proposed by Dentan from the ashes of some of the darkest periods in the past 10,000 years. Such societies did not need to abandon acquired agricultural techniques and other technologies but perhaps resumed coexisting values in order to practice the small scale self-sufficiency, subsistence economy that was the most common form of production right up to the 20th century.

We currently confront some of the most complex problems that we have faced as a species. With the confluence of peak oil (also applicable to coal, gas, phosphorus and other crucial resources for industrial society), climate change, economic instability, and a global population of over 7 billion, the question remains: will the current forms of state organization, and indeed capitalism, be able to solve (and survive) such challenges? Civil society efforts, such as the Transition Towns, Degrowth, Permaculture, or Integral Revolution movements, have called for the need to radically shift the way we relate to the environment and fellow humans (Trainer, 2010; Rodrigo Mora, 2012). Dentan (2010: 170) argued, "It seems likely that nation states will disintegrate into progressively smaller and smaller local social formations, as people revert to their usual response to disaster". Current emerging forms of intentional rural communities can be illustrative of future arrangements. Giorgi (2010: 93) is also convinced that, after this 7,000-year violent interlude, "nonkilling cultures will soon develop in some regions of the earth and their superior life-style and level of humanity will become a model to imitate" (2010: 93). There is reason to believe this is indeed possible and perhaps less catastrophic than what some have previously suggested if the functional potential of some proposals along the lines of decentralized peace systems are considered.

As Ferguson points out, "Even at relatively advanced levels of sociocultural evolution, there is no reason, theoretically, to deny the possibility of peaceful societies" (2013: 192). The relatively recent patterns of warfare, social inequality, and centralized authority "are not rooted deep in our evolutionary past but rather are capacities facilitated by the changing demographic, technological, and structural realities of human populations" (Fuentes, 2013: 90). The socially and culturally adaptive plasticity of our

species provides room for change: removing the social mechanisms that enable direct and structural violence and regaining the values and practices of solidarity, cooperation and mutual aid, while retaining the appropriate knowledge and technologies that have been developed in the past 10,000 years (Giorgi, 2010).

Our evolutionary baseline is not about romanticizing the past but about understanding if our current behaviours “are normative for human beings (...) or maladaptations that emerge from a mismatch between evolved needs and current environments” (Narvaez, 2013: 353). Gandhi’s call for a nonviolent society based on self-governed “village republics” is a practical example of a political attempt to transfer the cooperative, egalitarian, relatively peaceful, and, in many instances, nonviolent ethos of our hunter-gatherer past, where the whole planet perhaps supported about six million people, to our contemporary world of over seven billion. But rather than building such an alternative on a neo-malthusian argument, i.e., reducing world population back to 6 million, Gandhi identified extreme aggregation of people in small territories (large cities) as the main problem, mainly because such a pattern is not a response to human needs but a financial convenience to exploit intensive production and consumption at the expense of environmental and human degradation. In contrast, the self-sufficient but interdependent village republics are based on small, scattered populations biorregionally integrated in decentralized peace systems.

***Swaraj* and *Swadeshi* as Cornerstones of Gandhi’s Village Republic**

Gandhi’s vision of building nonviolent societies relied upon two basic principles: *Swaraj* (non-hierarchical community self-governance) and *Swadeshi* (self-sufficiency), which were presented as mutually interdependent.

In imagining a political system based on nonviolence, Gandhi’s ideas were very close to those of Tolstoy and Thoreau, two figures he admired, though providing a vision that was richer in detail. In an interview prepared by Harold Williams and published in *The Manchester Guardian* on February 9, 1905 (“A Visit to Count Tolstoy”, pp. 7-8), Tolstoy insisted, “All governments are maintained by violence or the threat of violence and violence is opposed to freedom.” Gandhi would repeatedly insist on this Weberian definition of the state, thus considering this form of political organization as incompatible with his vision of nonviolence: “The State represents violence in a concentrated and organized form. The

individual has a soul, but as the State is a soulless machine, it can never be weaned from violence to which it owes its very existence." (1998 [1934], Vol. 65: 318). Tolstoy's nonviolent society would be based on small-scale agrarian self-sufficiency, without division of labour, without cities, without factories, without laws enforced by coercion, without governmental rule or courts (McKeogh, 2009: 165-166), thus setting the basis for Gandhi's village *swaraj*.

From Thoreau's *Civil Disobedience* Gandhi borrowed the motto "That State will be the best governed which is governed the least", adding "That is why I have said that the ideally non-violent State will be an ordered anarchy" (1998 [1940], vol. 79: 122). Interestingly, the term "ordered anarchy" also appeared the same year in Evans-Pritchard's classic anthropological study of *The Nuer of Southern Sudan* (1940). Yet Gandhi's idea of self-government, understood both as individual self-government and community self-government, is also one of Thoreau's most significant contributions expressed in *Walden*, where self-governance is presented as a deeply political every day experience emerging out of freedom from, or indifference to, the state, thus implying the absolute decentralization of political commitments (see Lane, 2005; Jenco, 2009). Gandhi agreed: "Centralization as a system is inconsistent with non-violent structure of society" (1998 [1942], vol. 81: 424).

Gandhi labelled the socio-political structure that would support a nonviolent society as "Village Republic" or "Village *Swaraj*" following the traditional *Panchayat* local government (see Gandhi, 1962). Gandhi's definition of *Swaraj*, self-government, involves a "continuous effort to be independent of government control, whether it is foreign government or whether it is national" as no government should take care of the regulation of every-day life (1988 [1925], vol. 32: 258). *Swaraj*, characterized as "true democracy" and "individual freedom", will be achieved "only when all of us are firmly persuaded that our *Swaraj* has got to be won, worked and maintained through truth and Ahimsa alone" (1988 [1939], vol. 75: 176), "outward freedom" being obtained only to the extent that "inward freedom" has been self-grown.

Every individual and community should autonomously practice *swaraj*. Gandhi argued in 1946: "Independence must begin at the bottom. Thus, every village will be a republic or *panchayat* having full powers. It follows, therefore, that every village has to be self-sustained and capable of managing its affairs even to the extent of defending itself against the whole world" (1998 [1946], vol. 91: 325). The "village republic", as a societal unit, would be naturally based not on social status or property titles but on truth, nonviolence, and equal labour. An outline of the village *swaraj* is presented as that of "a complete republic, independent of its neighbours for its own vital wants, and yet interdependent for many others in

which dependence is a necessity" (1998 [1942], vol. 81: 113). This model was evidently inspired by the traditional *panchayat*:

... every village's first concern will be to grow its own food crops and cotton for its cloth. It should have a reserve for its cattle, recreation and playground for adults and children. (...) As far as possible every activity will be conducted on the co-operative basis. There will be no castes such as we have today with their graded untouchability. Non-violence with its technique of satyagraha and non-co-operation will be the sanction of the village community. ... The government of the village will be conducted by a Panchayat of five persons annually elected by the adult villagers, male and female, possessing minimum prescribed qualifications. These will have all the authority and jurisdiction required. Since there will be no system of punishments in the accepted sense, this Panchayat will be the legislature, judiciary and executive combined to operate for its year of office. ... Here there is perfect democracy based upon individual freedom. The individual is the architect of his own government. The law of non-violence rules him and his government. He and his village are able to defy the might of a world. (1998 [1942], vol. 81: 113)

In practical terms, Gandhi argues that the establishment of such a form of independent village *swaraj* does not require external authorization and needs not to wait for any major political revolution to happen in the surrounding state, therefore it sets a clear precedent for contemporary intentional communities, such as ecovillages, that are able to flourish in the interstices of the state. Initiating a village *swaraj* is an individual obligation that should expand to involve and commit the whole community:

Any village can become such a republic today without much interference even from the present Government whose sole effective connection with the villages is the exaction of the village revenue. ... To model such a village may be the work of a lifetime. Any lover of true democracy and village life can take up a village, treat it as his world and sole work, and he will find good results. He begins by being the village scavenger, spinner, watchman, medicine man and schoolmaster all at once. If nobody comes near him, he will be satisfied with scavenging and spinning" (1998 [1942], vol. 81: 113-114).

As early as 1910, Gandhi warned that if India replicated the British political, economic, administrative, legal, educational, and military institutions, she would be ruined, as it was these institutions, regardless of who controlled them, that posed the greatest barrier to the development of nonviolent *swaraj* and *swadeshi* (1998 [1910], vol. 10: 258). The freedom of India's peoples could not be reduced to transferring the administration of the state apparatus but should, above all, mean the complete removal of such structures. Unfortunately, this was not the case, as Gandhi clearly stated in "His Last Will and Testament" (January 29, 1948):

India having attained political independence through means devised by the Indian National Congress, the Congress in its present shape and form, i.e., as a propaganda vehicle and parliamentary machine, has outlived its use. India has still to attain social, moral and economic independence in terms of its seven hundred thousand villages as distinguished from its cities and towns (1998 [1948], vol. 98: 333-334).

In fact, even if the Indian National Congress placed village *swaraj*, as envisioned by Gandhi, at the core of its political platform from the 1920s to the country's independence, the concept of *swaraj* was almost completely neglected thereafter. The *panchayats* were included in the Constitution (Art. 40) but in non-justiciable terms ("The State shall take steps to organise village panchayats"), only to later be completely distorted in Part IX (Bates, 2005: 177-178; Swain, 2008: 8). It could be argued that Gandhi's vision of village *swaraj* is not only incompatible with the Western configuration of the Indian state but also with the industrial and urban ethos that currently rules it: "You cannot build non-violence on a factory civilization, but it can be built on self-contained villages. ... You have therefore to be rural-minded before you can be non-violent, and to be rural-minded you have to have faith in the spinning-wheel" (1998 [1939], vol. 77: 43). From a neurobiological perspective, this relates to Narvaez's (2014) argument that immersion in the natural world (vs. urban isolation) is crucial to develop "receptive intelligence" from early childhood onwards, as an environment that embeds children with natural agents and companions (and not just objects) is important in the process of creating a common human nature of cooperation, empathy, self-regulation, and small I-ego.

Gandhi argued that two divergent schools of thought challenged each other to move the world in opposing directions: that of the rural village, based on handicrafts, and that of cities, dependent on

machinery, industrialization and war (1998 [1944], vol. 85: 233). Modern cities are presented as an "excrescence" with the only purpose of "draining the life-blood of the villages", being "a constant menace to the life and liberty of the villagers" (1998 [1927], vol. 38: 210). As Thoreau and Tolstoy marked Gandhi's vision of politics, his correspondence with Edward Carpenter, author of *Civilisation, Its Cause and Cure* (1921), influenced the opposition established by Gandhi between *Satyagraha* and industrial civilization, understood as a "malady which needed a cure". Industrialism was based on the "capacity to exploit" and the "cure" for urban populations would be to "become truly village-minded" (1998 [1946], vol. 91: 390). Gandhi sharply stated: "The blood of the villages is the cement with which the edifice of the cities is built" (1998 [1946], vol. 91: 56-57). There was no place for exploitation or coercion in the context of village self-sufficiency and self-government.

Much of the malaise that Gandhi attributed to industrialism did, in fact, affect India in the hands of the new independent state in spite of his continuous warnings. The consequences are evident in Vandana Shiva's book *The Violence of the Green Revolution* (1991) that exposes the tragic results of India's governmental agricultural development programs launched with the technical and economic support of international agencies under "quick fix" promises. Such measures left a deadly trail of violence with approximately 15,000 killed between 1986 and 1991 in associated conflicts, destruction of soil fertility, suppression of genetic and ecological diversity, and indebted farmers. While he stated without doubt that "tractors and chemical fertilizers will spell our ruin" (1998 [1947/48], vol. 98: 88, 289), Gandhi publicly supported contemporary efforts to develop organic agriculture. In fact, the principles of organic agriculture developed by Balfour (1944) and Howard during the 1940s and still current today were based mainly on the observation of traditional agricultural methods in India, an experience also facilitated by Gandhi and his associates.

This places Gandhian thinking on integral, simple living as a clear precedent for many proposals that were advanced in the last quarter of the 20th century in the fields of economy (Schumacher, 1973; Ostrom, 1990), technology (Mumford, 1967 & 1970; see also Glendinning's *Neo-Luddite manifesto*), energy (Trainer, 2010) and politics (Bookchin, 2003). The practical application of such principles in intentional communities such as the *ashrams* also spread into numerous experiments around the world. Lanza del Vasto's "Community of the Ark" is one early example of what would later develop into a global ecovillage movement (see Drago and Trianni, 2008). Vinoba Bhave, another disciple of Gandhi, also continued the vision of decentralized administration in India in spite of the lack of political support for

such a program (see Bhave, 2007). In the following section, some of these movements and their own diverse historical roots are explored.

The Village Republic Beyond Gandhi

While nonviolence has sometimes been portrayed as a seemingly passive attitude, Gandhi's political development of the term through *Satyagraha* and the view expressed in this chapter are the opposite: nonviolence entails proactively resisting injustice, violence, and oppression through individual and community self-government and self-sufficiency. Even though it is clear that the traditional *panchayati raj* was an immediate inspiration for Gandhi's vision of village *swaraj*, it has sometimes been argued that such forms of local political organization would be relevant only to (and possible in) the Indian subcontinent or similar cultural settings and certainly not for/in urbanized Western societies. Such a view fails to see the connection between Gandhi's proposal and other social and political movements around the world that have included similar conceptualizations as a key component of their aspirations. Gandhi's writings on this topic were probably unknown to many agrarian, libertarian, ecologist, spiritual or indigenous movements but, nevertheless, the same thread binding self-government, self-sufficiency, and nonviolent conflict resolution (even if expressed in different terms) appears abundantly.

Early agrarian movements such as the "Diggers" in mid-17th century England defended the egalitarian, simple lifestyle of rural communities embedded in nature by resisting enclosures of communal land (that placed in the hands of individuals or the state what previously was open territory under community stewardship) and other impositions of the expanding state. Other Christian-based rural sects, such as the Amish, Hutterites or Mennonites (with obvious individual nuances), developed similar patriarchal interpretations of egalitarianism and rural community government, while more recent Christian pacifist communities such as the Tzotzil Maya "Las Abejas" from Chiapas, Mexico, practice a more integrative approach along similar lines to the Zapatista efforts toward community autonomy (Tavanti, 2003). Another relevant example of a spiritually-based community self-government initiative is Sri Lanka's Sarvodaya Shramadana Movement, founded by A. T. Ariyaratne, which clearly combines Buddhist and Gandhian practices for village *swaraj* based on *ahimsa* (see Ariyaratne, 1999).

In other contexts, it was national liberation or indigenous movements that placed traditional and renewed forms of community self-government at the core of their political aspirations, which were

naturally and frequently confronted by centralizing nation-state ideology. The inclusion of rural assembly democracy, including the participation of men and women, was a feature of Galician nationalism in the first half of the 20th century, seeking the reestablishment of village and parish "open councils" (*concelho aberto*) and mutual aid practices (*ajudas, rogas*). Similar practices (such as the Basque *batzarre* and *auzolan*) have also been considered as tenets for the reorganization of these societies in opposition to the decaying nation-state framework (Escalante Ruiz, 2014; Sastre, 2013; Santos Vera and Madina Elguezabal, 2012). This trend is recurrent among contemporary movements that seek to support their calls for grass-roots democracy on historical or traditional popular institutions, ranging from the *veche* assemblies reclaimed by the Slavic Rodnoverie (Aitamurto, 2008) to the New England *town meetings* upheld by some proponents of secession in the United States (Bryan and McClaughry, 1990).

An especially interesting case is that of Kurdistan, where Kurdistan Workers' Party leader Abdullah Öcalan proposed to abandon violence, embracing a new model of "democratic confederalism", striving for community self-sufficiency and self-government as a "democratic system of a people without a State" (Öcalan, 2011). The implementation of such ideas since 2005 in the "low intensity war" context of Northern Kurdistan and since 2012 in the context of outright warfare of Syrian Rojava by the *Koma Civakên Kurdistan* (Kurdistan Communities Confederation) is a practical example of an effort to establish an extensive system of village and neighborhood councils incorporating the principles of ecology, gender-liberation, and direct democracy (TATORT Kurdistan, 2013, 2014). Such efforts share commonalities with the new forms of rural community governance in the Zapatista Autonomous Municipalities and *Caracoles* of Chiapas, which also represent an ongoing large-scale model of alternative social and political organization. The fact that such structures are able to emerge and thrive in the war-torn contexts of Chiapas and Kurdistan reaffirms the hypotheses of a surfacing egalitarian mutual-aid ethos, brought forward above following Harris (1990) and Dentan (2010).

Arguably, libertarian-inspired "village republics" also share much of Gandhi's vision of *swaraj*. Early anarchist theorists such as Proudhon, a pacifist, conceived a stateless society organized through a federation of "free communes" (see *The Principle of Federation*, 1863). In his *Revolutionary Catechism*, Bakunin (1866) also argues, "the basic unit of all political organization in each country must be the completely autonomous commune", in similar terms to those of Kropotkin in his 1880 *The Paris Commune*. Some creative contemporary proposals include P.M. (1985), Fotopoulos (1997: 224), Bookchin (2003), Herod (2007), Rodrigo Mora (2012, 2013). The autonomy of Swiss communes

(municipalities) with their well-established assembly governments was an inspiration for such proposals and continues to serve as a relevant example of community self-government today (see Ladner, 2002). A fair number of contemporary intentional communities set out in rural areas (ecovillages) represent attempts to implement such libertarian principles. The "Federation of Egalitarian Communities" in several US states is one example.

Ecovillages with diverse sources of inspiration, yet including a common set of principles which usually integrate voluntary simple living, permaculture, consensus decision-making, and ecological sustainability have grown exponentially since the late 1960s and early 1970s. Trainer (2010: 285) went as far as to suggest that the eco-village movement was the most significant event in the 20th century as the "first significant attempt to build settlements that are ecologically, socially and spiritually satisfactory". Of course, many communities with these attributes were already in existence if we look beyond the Western industrialized world, but ecovillages certainly represent an experimental demonstration of how individual and collective transformations of city-dwellers back to a nonviolent rural ethos is possible, as Gandhi asserted. The larger Transition Towns Movement is a recent attempt to take the values of such small intentional communities to larger town and city settings, with a fairly positive start. Peasant organizations in the "Via Campesina" movement and agrarian authors such as Berry (2002), have also shifted to advocate for family-farm-based sustainable agriculture and food sovereignty in opposition to the system of the so-called Green Revolution. All in all, such efforts reinforce Gandhi's vision of (re)building societies based on nonviolence from the small efforts of individuals and communities throughout the world.

Decentralized Peace Systems as Oceanic Circles

Gandhi envisioned "Oceanic Circles" as a global federation of small self-sufficient but interdependent village republics, a "structure of innumerable villages (...) [where] there will be ever-widening, never-ascending circles" (1998 [1946]: 326). To try to grasp such a vision some of the examples of Peace Systems presented by Fry (2012) will be discussed, highlighting the contrasts between their centralized or decentralized nature and combination of nonwarring external arrangements and nonkilling/nonviolent

internal organization. The review of actual institutional settings and political proposals, even if not along the lines of Gandhian thinking, illustrate the potentiality of this model. As Fry concludes,

Constructing a peace system for the entire planet would involve many synergistic elements, including the transformative vision that a new peace-based global system is in fact possible, the understanding that interdependence and common challenges require cooperation, an added level of social identity that includes all human beings and encompasses more than mere national patriotism, the creation of effective democratic and judicial procedures at a supranational level, and the development of values and symbols that not only sustain peace and justice for all but also relegate the institution of war, like slavery before it, to the pages of history. (2012: 882)

Fry (2012: 881) provides three diverse examples of Peace Systems that were able to suppress warfare within the systems themselves: the Upper Xingu River basin tribes in Brazil, the Iroquois Confederacy, and the European Union, considered as "active peace systems" as they have been actively created and maintained. Warfare outside the system and violence within, including homicide, do occur, nevertheless. By comparison, "passive systems" are those in which nonwarring is a behavioral default, more often presenting not only internal and external restraint from war but also a nonviolent societal ethos, as is the case for the Central Peninsular Orang Asli societies, such as the Batek, Chewong or Semai.

In spite of the huge differences between the three active peace systems described by Fry, ranging from the originally nomadic hunter-gatherers and now mostly sedentary Upper Xingu tribes or the agriculturalist Iroquois to the 28 States of the EU, they provide examples of how decentralized peace systems could operate.

Fremion (2002: 34) described the Iroquois Confederacy, also referred to as the League of Peace and Power, although not exactly the same, as a decentralized federation. In the absence of any permanent centralized hierarchy and considering each of the 50 *Hoyenah* or Sachems (chiefs) appointed to the Grand Council of the League open to being deposed by the women of each clan who elected them in the first place, the Confederacy resembles the idea of widening circles from village, to clan, to each of the Six Nations and the wider Confederacy. As the Confederacy operated by consensus, the *Hoyenah* delegates of the clans of each Nation should find agreement among themselves, to be followed by a unanimous decision at the council. Keeping the peace for over three centuries among its members, the Iroquois

League exemplifies Kant's system of perpetual peace through the use of consultation and negotiation (Crawford, 1994: 346).

But the Iroquois Confederacy is not only relevant as an experience of the past, as "it survives to this day and guides the political life of some of the most radical and self-reliant indigenous communities of North America" (Day, 2005: 193). Current Kanien'kehá:ka or Mohawk, one of the Confederacy's Nations, "conceptualized a path of self-determination that involves neither a recovery of a partial remnant of sovereignty lost in the past, nor a future project of a totalizing nation-state", considering as Gandhi, that "while redistribution of sovereignty may indeed challenge a particular colonial oppressor, it will not necessarily challenge the tools of his oppression" (Day, 2005: 194). Such reflection has moved communities to devise and implement forms of self-government that do not depend on devolution of authority from the existing states and that are actually able to elude their control, such as various indigenous initiatives in North America, the Zapatista Autonomous Municipalities in Chiapas, or the Kurdistan Communities Confederation, ultimately envisioned to act as decentralized peace systems.

A rather different example of a Peace System proposed by Fry (2012) is the European Union. Although the EU has been successful in preventing war among its members, its structure remains as a compromise between a bureaucratic superstate and a federal arrangement between nation-states. Stemming from the European Coal and Steel Community (1951), the European Economic Community (1957) and the European Atomic Energy Community (1958), is to a great extent the opposite of a "decentralized peace system" if compared to the Iroquois, Xingu or Zapatista arrangements. In spite of the "principle of subsidiarity" that calls for decision-making being made as closely as possible to the citizens (Art. 5 of the Treaty on European Union), which would theoretically enhance the role of municipal and regional governments, in practice all core decision-making is dependent on State governments through the EU institutions and an expanding class of senior EU bureaucrats. While problem-solving at the smaller communities should take precedence over any other level, EU policy recommendations, including anti-crisis measures imposed on Southern European States such as Spain or Portugal, demanded the suppression of sub-municipal administrations (parish or community councils), the only level in which direct assembly democracy in the form of village, parish or town assemblies were legally possible. In political terms, the greatest contrast between the EU (or, for that case, any other federal nation-state that maintains peace within its borders) and decentralized peace systems is the horizontality of public

decision-making derived from social egalitarianism in the latter arrangements, versus the concentration of political power in small elites that characterizes nation-states in general.

The fact that this is actually the case does not mean that alternative decentralized models could not be considered instead. Indeed, they have been considered in the past. Beyond the economicist and industrialist views that inspired Jean Monnet's European integration proposals, the crucial years after 1945 saw a variety of different views on how to build a European Peace System. Swiss liberal theorist Adolf Gasser had written and published during the Second World War his book *Communal freedom as salvation of Europe* (1943) [*Gemeindefreiheit und Zukunft Europas*, not translated into English], arguing that non-authoritarian States are only viable if they are grounded on strong communal (municipal) self-government, establishing a direct link between stable peace and free municipal self-government. Starting from the Swiss tradition and distilling the bottom-up concept of federalism offered by Proudhon without giving up his own Liberal view of the state, Gasser defined his vision of a peaceful interdependent Europe as "voluntary contractual federation of communities" built up from the small, self-governing units (Roca, 2010).

Such views on bottom-up federalism were not only shared, at least partially, by some liberals and most libertarians, but also by peripheral nationalists, such as the French National Minorities Committee, formed in 1927 under a Charter that asserted:

Modern States, based on force, will become invalid due to the world's increasing economic interdependence, as the antagonisms in which their existence is based only lead to increasingly terrible wars. It would be best to substitute them by a federation of peoples (...) providing the two most essential needs: freedom and peace (quoted in Castela, 2010[1944]: 59).

To illustrate this, in the 1930 *Arredor de si* novel by Galizian nationalist Outeiro Pedralho, the author's literary alter ego Adrião Solóvio imagines the future map of Europe, in which "instead of States, each land is a free grouping of municipalities where no one dominated anyone else" (...) "a fraternity of small happy communes" opposed to the "monstrous unnatural growth of large cities" (1985 [1930]: 192).

Both Proudhon's *Du Principe fédératif* and Gasser's principle of "communal autonomy" stimulated a variety of grassroot groups across Europe including the French "integral federalists", such as Alexandre Marc and Michel Mouskhely, and the overarching Union of European Federalists. The 1949 "Permanent

committee for European municipalities and regions” led to the establishment in 1951 of the Council of European Communes, that was envisioned by Gasser as a first step toward a federal Europe based on self-governing municipalities (Gouzy, 2004).

The success of the top-down and nation-state based approach steered by Monet and Schuman led to the formation of the pivotal European Economic Community, eventually relegating the Council of Communes into a politically irrelevant institution. Nevertheless, the building of a peaceful Europe based on the internal freedom of thousands of democratically self-governed communities remains as a vision for a continental-wide decentralized peace system.

Beyond Europe, the tension between centralism and community decentralism is present in other polities that share some of the EU's federal features, such as the USA. Two decades prior to the Occupy Movement, interest on the town meeting as an institution of assembly direct democracy brought about political proposals such as those by Frank Bryan and John McClaughry (1989) in *The Vermont Papers: Recreating Democracy on a Human Scale*. The authors defend the transformation of the State of Vermont into a federation of small shires (with an average of 10,000 people), in turn made up of self-governing towns. Bryan (2004), in a seminal book on town meetings significantly titled *Real Democracy*, continued to defend decentralized self-government as the only meaningful form to empower people and surpass the crisis of nation-states. Recalling Dahl and Tufte's (1973) argument that transnational organizations require very small units where people can become politically involved, the author suggests that the USA should shift toward a commonwealth of small self-governing political units organized through bio-regions. Others suggest outright independence through secession to realize such a platform (see Miller and Williams, 2013).

Political experiences such as the the Iroquois League, the Council of European Communes, the Zapatista Autonomous Rebel Municipalities or the Kurdistan Communities Confederation represent different attempts to build Peace Systems based on the principle of decentralized community self-government. Additional insights are offered by cases as the Icelandic Commonwealth (930-1262 CE), a stateless system for conflict resolution based on decentralized democratic consensus, and contemporary proposals. Templer's (2008) "No-state solution" for Palestine/Israel, incorporates the vision of a decentralized peace system as a novel solution to a seemingly intractable conflict, consisting on a multicultural and multifaith "Cooperative Commonwealth" built on the basis of "new forms of decentralized direct democracy, people's participation and horizontalism, neighborhood autonomy", that

would go beyond historical Palestine encompassing other territories of the Fertile Crescent region (Iraq, Kuwait, Syria, Lebanon, Jordan and Egypt) following a bioregional perspective that considers the need for common management of increasingly scarce resources such as fresh water, gas, and oil. Andrej Grubačić (2010: 208) describes a Balkans Federation along similar lines: "a transethnic society with polyculturalist outlook that recognizes multiple and overlapping identities and affiliations based on voluntary cooperation, mutual aid, a direct democracy of nested councils and a self-managed economy". Grubačić calls for a balkanization of Europe from below, considering his Balkans example as a "basis for the regeneration and reconstruction of social and political life of Europe" (2010: 209) through a Commonwealth grounded on direct local decision-making.

These actual examples, together with multiple proposals around direct democracy currently stemming from social movements such as Occupy, Transition Towns, the 15M Movement in Spain, the Catalan Integral Cooperative and a variety of nonviolent grassroots initiatives around the world, indicate that Gandhi's "Oceanic Circles" are indeed plausible and that the time for their consideration is ripe.

Final Remarks

Some authors seem to support the idea that while our nomadic hunter-gathering past was marked by chronic carnage, it is the "forces of modernity" that have played a key role in the reduction of violence, in contrast with nostalgic elements of a peaceable past such as "communitarian solidarity," "ecological sustainability" or "harmony with the rhythms of nature". Needless to say, this stance encompasses the idea that we are somehow on the right path and that the coercive state is a necessity if we are to control the innate violence of our human nature. While some claim that the State, as it currently stands, is somehow an inevitability in our path toward "civilization", Clastres (1989) defended the view that stateless societies remained so, retaining their egalitarian and largely nonviolent forms of organization, because of the mechanisms they had in place to prevent the accumulation of power and emergence of hierarchies. Both views would probably concur in considering the forces of modernity—the State and its most notorious physical manifestation, the city—as agents designed to simultaneously remove us from nature and remove any nature within us.

But this is not necessarily a one-way road. As Eisler (1987) reminds us, the life-sustaining and enhancing *Chalice* of partnership cultures is an alternative to the lethal *Blade* of domination systems. Top-down control, rigid male dominance, and cultural conditioning to accept violence and domination can be replaced by egalitarian family and political structures, equal partnership between women and men, and recognition of nonviolence, nonkilling, and nondomination as normative social behaviors. The forces of the domination model, "which in the case of states, is ultimately their capacity to inspire terror" as Graeber (2004: 63) explains, can be diverted, frozen, transformed or deprived of their substance. In the case of the modern state, this would occur both from above, through the development of international organizations, and from below, through the revitalization of local self-governance.

The age-long peace system that operates in Peninsular Malaysia among the neighbouring Chewong, Semai, Jahai, Btsisi, Batek and other Semang nomadic hunter-gatherer groups, not only keeping at peace with each other but also upholding internal nonviolence and renouncing the use of violence toward encroaching outsiders, is a contrast with the violent clashes among, between, and within neighboring state societies in the same region (Satha-Anand and Urbain, Eds, 2013). If we consider that such peace systems were common in "Zomia", the great mountain uplands of mainland Southeast Asia, China, India and Bangladesh (see Scott, 2009), it is perhaps the "forces of modernity" and its dominant nation-state political system that should start to be placed under scrutiny.

As we move toward the peak of a historical process of centripetal concentration of political power, the idea of decentralized peace systems offers an alternative for the creation of new structures that enable both the participatory resolution of conflicts in large regional or global settings and reengaging communities with a sense of ownership over decision-making and problem solving. Increased political participation and involvement in decision-making processes has been linked with community happiness, well-being, resilience and cohesion, which in turn are correlated with reduced levels of violence. Evidence from the assembly direct democracy practices of Swiss local communes and participatory procedures at Canton and Federal levels (Frey and Stutzer, 2002) and observations from the New England town meetings in the United States (Bryan, 2004) point in this direction and invite further study on the psychology and neurophysiology of political participation.

The development of decentralized peace systems may happen from below, as Gandhi predicted, but the acute social transformations linked to peak oil and associated energy problems may well drive certain degree of decentralization from above (Trainer, 2010). In either case, the existence of an active, inclusive

and participatory citizenship, from the community level to the international arena is the cornerstone for the emergence of such systems. Participation beyond purely electoral politics requires decentralization allowing communities to make decisions on their own but also the reconsideration of the principle of subsidiarity in international organizations (such as the EU) as a means to enable real citizen participation in decision-making processes.

In practical terms, decentralized peace systems would require community constituencies of 1,000 or less where face-to-face political participation is possible, rebuilding a culture of deliberative consensus-driven problem-solving practices. "Oceanic circles" in the form of federal, confederal and commonwealth arrangements should have such self-governing "Village republics" as its foundations. The establishment of a pilot Chamber of Communes in Europe facilitating consultations at local level through electronic or assembly direct democracy tools could be a test for such build-up, moving the EU toward a decentralized peace system. Alternatively, lack of state responsiveness to calls for democratization could bring about parallel institution-building based on grassroots movements, as some of the examples in this chapter illustrate. Revolution or reform, collective will or systemic collapse, or any combination thereof, may produce yet the best approximation to Gandhi's vision of a decentralized polity capable of sustaining a truly nonviolent society in peaceful relations with the rest of the world.

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